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Todd Broaddus
CSUSB

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Recalcitrance or Redemption? The Contested Legacy of Britain's Iron Lady

By Todd Broaddus

"Where there is discord, may we bring harmony," uttered Margaret Thatcher as she stood on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street in May, 1979.¹ Despite the solemnity of her Franciscan supplication, rarely has a prayer so manifestly gone unanswered in both life and death. As flags at Parliament, Buckingham, and across the United Kingdom were lowered to half-staff, Prime Minister David Cameron lauded Thatcher as having "saved our country."² Salvation, however, is a relative term these days, and for those who, upon hearing of the baroness' death, celebrated in the streets of Brixton or for the working-class coal mining families of Yorkshire and the Humber in the North Country, Thatcher's erstwhile cauterization of Britain's industrial sectors brought only condemnation. "The Queen was sad to hear the news of the death of Baroness Thatcher. Her Majesty will be sending a private message of sympathy to the family," Buckingham Palace dutifully reported.³ The Queen, along with the National Health Service, shared the distinction as essentially the only two bodies that Thatcher had failed to privatize during her stretch as prime minister. The latter attempt, at least, was not from a lack of want. She was "The Woman Who Divided a Nation," wrote one Labourite tabloid, the *Daily Mirror*. Millennials did what they do best and took to Facebook, and blitzed YouTube with an anti-Thatcher campaign that netted the seventy-four-year-old song, "Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead;" top spot on UK charts (not quite the reappearance Dorothy had envisioned). Always one to keep the political rhetoric close to the privy, Member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway irreverently added,

¹ "1979: Election Victory for Margaret Thatcher," *BBC News*, May 4, 1979, accessed June 8, 2013, http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/may/4/newsid_2503000/2503195.stm. Thatcher paraphrases a stanza from the Prayer of Saint Francis (English version).

² Erin McClam, "Margaret Thatcher, 'Iron Lady' Who Led Conservative Resurgence in Britain, Dies at 87" *NBC News*, April 8, 2013, accessed June 8, 2013, http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/04/08/17653388-.html.

³ "Queen Saddened by Thatcher's Death," *MSN News*, April 8, 2013, accessed June 8, 2013, <http://news.uk.msn.com/uk/queen-saddened-by-thatchers-death>.

“Tramp the dirt down” on his Twitter feed.⁴ For many, the soul-snatching economic bargain that the baroness had struck with the British people, brought to mind the Devil’s visit to Faust.

Composing a Legacy: Historiography and Hagiography

In Europe’s post-war era, there were few individuals who were as polarizing as Margaret Hilda Thatcher. Although entrepreneurs have sung dirges for many of her contemporaries, her own legacy, in many ways, remains a divided house. Without question, Thatcher has had a seismic impact on the British scene. Not even Galloway would dispute this. How has Thatcherism shaped our world, however? What, in fact, is her legacy? Attempts to galvanize her story began early.⁵ In 1987, Dennis Kavanagh, Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool, chided the so-called “Thatcher experiment” for having sounded the death knell for the post-war Keynesian consensus.⁶ Apparently, one could do worse, at least according to Martin Holmes, who hailed the prime minister’s monetarist principles as an “impressive economic achievement.”⁷ Despite an exhaustive reading of Thatcher’s initial economic policies, Holmes’ first-term impressions nearly border on the quixotic, as the mounting unemployment rate and onerous deregulatory practices are noticeably omitted in favor of his own government assessment, that is, predictably, one of “sustained success.”⁸ In his door-stopping biography, *The Iron Lady*, Hugo Young presents Thatcher as an indomitable, yet flawed, political force.⁹ Perhaps an even greater personalized depiction of Thatcher can be found in Peter Jenkins’ *Mrs. Thatcher’s Revolution*. The author, by virtue of being a former lobby

⁴ “Anger at George Galloway’s ‘tramp the dirt down’ Twitter Remark after Thatcher’s Death,” *London Evening Standard*, April 8, 2013, accessed June 8, 2013, <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/anger-at-george-galloways-tramp-the-dirt-down-twitter-remark-after-thatchers-death-8564876.html>. Galloway’s quip, “Tramp the dirt down,” was the title of a 1988 Elvis Costello song berating the then-prime minister.

⁵ James Douglas, “The Changing Tide-Some Recent Studies of Thatcherism,” *British Journal of Political Science* 19, no. 3 (1989): 399–403.

⁶ Dennis Kavanagh, *Thatcherism and British Politics: The End of Consensus?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 6–10.

⁷ Martin Holmes, *The First Thatcher Government* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 68.

⁸ *Ibid.* For an overview of Holmes’ work, see Philippe Sands, review of “*The First Thatcher Government*,” by Martin Holmes and *Thatcher: The First Term* by Patrick Cosgrave,” *Boston College International & Comparative Law Review* 9, no. 2 (1986): 453.

⁹ Hugo Young, *The Iron Lady: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (New York: Macmillan London, 1989).

correspondent, attributes the sui generis “Thatcher Factor” as the primary catalyst for Britain’s economic and geopolitical policies.¹⁰ In contrast, Joel Krieger, William Keegan, and to a lesser degree Kavanagh, argue that the centralizing agents of Thatcherism had more to do with the widespread breakdown of the post-war consensus, and less with a “simple provincial [Thatcher] looking for an uncomplicated philosophy.”¹¹ In 2005’s widely read *Postwar*, Tony Judt masterfully tailors Thatcher to fit within the milieu of the 1980s before settling on an evenhanded legacy of economic efficiency offset by social fragmentation.¹²

In an effort to develop a greater understanding of her legacy, two determinative events during Thatcher’s tenure as UK prime minister are revisited and examined. First, Thatcher’s prosecution of the war to reclaim the Falklands in 1982 is explored. The result of the conflict led to an ensuing groundswell of popularity for Thatcher, which propelled her to success during the elections of 1983. Throughout the literature, there is a parting of ways when it comes to the Argentinian affair and the so-called Falklands Factor, its redeeming role within the British psyche, and its novel influence on England’s connection to Thatcher. In large part, the tactical considerations of the engagement have become intertwined within disparate political interests, further complicating the issue; nevertheless, these are the strings that will be pulled. Secondly, Thatcher’s engagement in the UK miners’ strike of 1984–85 is considered. It is quite possible that without the victory in the Falklands, Thatcher’s curbing of union power would not have transpired following the year-long standoff with the coal industry in places like Yorkshire, County Durham, and Nottinghamshire. It did, nonetheless, and became for many—especially those on the far left—an unpardonable sin. In examining these two determinative events, it is suggested that Thatcher emerged as a polarizing, yet unique political phenomenon, whose legacy of determination and intransigence was shaped by her self-identification as a political outsider.

The Falklands Crisis

During the winter of 1981, General Leopoldo Galtieri’s military junta seized control of Buenos Aires. Argentina’s aggression nearly eight

¹⁰ Peter Jenkins, *Mrs. Thatcher’s Revolution: The Ending of the Socialist Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1988).

¹¹ William Keegan, *Mrs. Thatcher’s Economic Experiment* (London: Allen Lane, 1984), 82; and Joel Krieger, *Reagan, Thatcher and the Politics of Decline* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986).

¹² Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 543.

thousand miles away, mobilized the languid British government and provided Thatcher with a dress rehearsal for a decade of confrontation, both at home and abroad. For Thatcher, who was already embroiled in panoply of parliamentary issues in London, while simultaneously monitoring the decolonization of Rhodesia in southern Africa, the Argentinian crisis initially found her ill-prepared and reluctant to prosecute a war on foreign soil. In large part, Buenos Aires' saber rattling and martial overtures to the Foreign Office had fallen on deaf ears, and following the 1981 Defence Review's budgetary recommendation to withdraw the HMS *Endurance* from its maritime coordinates near the Southern Cone, the Argentinians invaded.¹³ The subsequent war to reclaim the Falkland Islands (April 2- June 14, 1982) left an indelible impression upon the Iron Lady, as it claimed the lives of 255 British and over 650 Argentinians:

Nothing remains more vividly in my mind, looking back on my years in No. 10, than the eleven weeks in the spring of 1982 when Britain fought and won the Falklands War. Much was at stake: what we were fighting for eight thousand miles away in the South Atlantic was not only the territory and the people of the Falklands, important though they were. We were defending our honour as a nation, and principles of fundamental importance to the whole world—above all, that aggressors should never succeed and that international law should prevail over the use of force. The war was very sudden. No one predicted the Argentine invasion more than a few hours in advance, though many predicted it in retrospect. When I became Prime Minister I never thought that I would have to order British troops into combat and I do not think I have ever lived so tensely or intensely as during the whole of that time.¹⁴

Part revisionist, post-colonial romanticist, heroine, apologist, and polemicist—even in perpetuity—Thatcher's historical seating chart makes for contentious dinnertime conversations. Within her private recollections, compiled a decade after the conclusion of the war, it is as if she is still on the floor of the House of Commons, staring down the opposition party across the aisle, sparring with—and even attacking—her

¹³ Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 174. Thatcher attributes the date of the Argentinian invasion to the 150th anniversary of formal British rule on the archipelago.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

Labourite interlocutors; and defending herself against the charge of unpreparedness.¹⁵ The charge, however, was not completely unfounded. Besides, the Falklands were not exactly the crown jewel of what was left of the empire, and the size of the garrison at Port Stanley was far from Napoleonic (the London Philharmonic Orchestra could field more men than the Royal Marines garrison there).¹⁶

Following Argentina's invasion on April 1, a BBC radio producer, catching wind of the rumored offensive, made an inquiry at the Foreign Office, in London, only to be told by the duty officer that Port Stanley remained a haven of tranquility.¹⁷ Unalarmed, both men went their separate ways as Argentine commandos stormed the Moody Brook barracks eight thousand miles away. Appearing before the Commons two days later, in what Thatcher described as "the most difficult [debate] I ever had to face," she reported that the Argentinian landing had not been confirmed until 8:30 that morning (following a conversation with Sir Rex Hunt, governor of the Falkland Islands).¹⁸ Needless to say, the chamber erupted in a fit of "bulldog outrage."¹⁹ Yet, the MPs knew what was at stake, especially those who painfully recalled Prime Minister Anthony Eden's ill-fated adventurism in the Sinai Peninsula, which had fettered the collective conscience of a generation of British to the broadcasted humiliation of the Suez Crisis in 1956.²⁰ To be sure, the weight of the

¹⁵ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶ Robin Harris, *The Collected Speeches of Margaret Thatcher* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 154. Misplacing colonial territories in the South Seas had not been without precedent. In late 1976, the Argentinian junta, apparently in need of a military victory, invaded the barren British dependency in the far-flung territory of Southern Thule, "boldly" capturing a number of its penguin and petrel inhabitants. Despite the Argentinian Air Force setting up shop on sovereign British territory, David Owen, the foreign secretary under Callaghan at the time, decided to cover up the incident rather than complicate relations with Buenos Aires. The House was not informed until a British Antarctic survey ship, the ice-strengthened RRS Bransfield, finally cruised past Southern Thule two years later and noticed the Argentinian regulars. Losing the territories that you know about was quite disconcerting, but to be made aware of your downsizing two Christmases later was particularly dreadful.

¹⁷ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 264.

¹⁸ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 180.

¹⁹ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 264.

²⁰ While the Union Jack emerged from World War II at half-staff, it took the ill-advised Anglo-Franco clandestine incursion (1956) into the Suez to demonstrate to Britain what the world already knew: despite retaining some vestige of imperialism, Britain success ultimately depended on US consent; and, clearer still, imperialists and their intrigues linger long after their seat of power has gone. This appeared particularly obvious to everyone, but the British and their tripartite conspirators. Perhaps, not since the Children's Crusade to the Holy Land, has an undertaking invited such calamity and embarrassment as Eden and

moment was not lost on the prime minister, who was well aware that a military defeat in the Falklands would be devastating to the United Kingdom. Thatcher's strategy during the debate on the House floor that night was twofold: first, remind the Chamber that territory in the South Sandwich Islands had also been lost under Callaghan's watch; and second, dispel any attempt to link her tardy response to the foreign policy foibles of the previous administration. To ensure that the Iron Lady was not about to dilute her ore, Enoch Powell stood in the Chamber and reminded everyone of the prime minister being dubbed the "Iron Lady," and that now was the time to "learn what metal she is made of."²¹

There is no doubt that for supporters of Thatcher, retaking the Falklands by force would be a seminal moment of her legacy. With that in mind, and amidst a crisis in domestic unpopularity, Thatcher leapt onto the well-traveled path to Britain's War Room, anxious to exorcise the demons of the past. The former research-chemist from Lincolnshire, however, appeared remarkably well equipped for repelling the Galtieri junta and defending Britain's honor on the high seas. After British forces defeated the Argentinians in South Georgia on April 25, Thatcher beseeched Londoners to praise the effort and sacrifice of the British Task Force.²² Her celebratory proclamations soon proved prophetic as the Falklands campaign, following the controversial sinking of the Argentinian light cruiser, *General Belgrano*, by the British submarine, HMS *Conqueror*, drew to a close in mid-June as white flags were hoisted over Port Stanley. Soon after learning the news that weary Argentinian troops had thrown down their arms and begun to retreat, Thatcher addressed the nation:

Guy Mollet's false-flag theatrics along the Sinai Peninsula. Moreover, not only was President Eisenhower excluded from Britain's Suez ambitions, but also Eden's face-off with Gamal Nasser over the "jugular vein of the empire" coincided, almost to the hour, with the Soviet invasion of Hungary. Eden's chronological misstep—which doubled as his political gravedigger—infuriated Eisenhower, and collectively saddled Britain with an identity crisis that, in some cases, was not rehabilitated until Thatcher crossed swords with Argentina over the Falklands in 1982. Besides, the cold warriors in Washington had little patience for the parlor room colluding of Paris and London, especially when Soviet tanks were simultaneously rolling over barricades in Budapest. For other samples of Britain's perspective of the Suez, in particular, those exhibited by the Suez group, see Leon D. Epstein, *British Politics in the Suez Crisis* (Urban, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 51-60.

²¹ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 184. In a footnote, Thatcher explains that Powell returned and made the subject a Parliamentary Question. Not surprisingly, the report showed her substance to be of the highest quality. After Powell's findings were printed and framed, they were hung on Thatcher's office wall.

²²Young, *The Iron Lady*, 273.

And so today we can rejoice at our success in the Falklands and take pride in the achievement of the men and women of our task force. But we do so, not as at some flickering of a flame which must soon be dead. No—we rejoice that Britain has rekindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today had begun to burn as brightly as before. Britain found herself again in the South Atlantic and will not look back from the victory she has won.²³

The Spirit of the Falklands

Indeed, the shadow of the Falklands conflict would loom over Thatcher more than any other event during her tenure as prime minister. In retrospect, it is clear that the Falklands spirit was never meant to be geographically confined to a rocky archipelago in the South Atlantic; instead, it was to be a salve for the British psyche, which, if embraced, would collectively lift the English from their post-colonial malaise.²⁴ Britain had been suffering from a self-imposed imperial coma ever since Winston Churchill had enjoyed his last *habanos* and now, following a quarrel over an unwelcoming windswept rock in the southerly part of the dependencies, the empire was ready to get back to what empires do: *rule*.²⁵ This pursuit was one that Margaret Thatcher was more than

²³ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 235.

²⁴ Hulmut Norpoth, "The Falklands War and Government Popularity in Britain: Rally without Consequence or Surge without Decline?" *Electoral Studies* 6, no. 1 (1987): 7-13.

²⁵ Fueled by an awakened nationalistic fervor, the process of decolonization became the post-war reality for the former great powers: England, France, and the Netherlands. Indeed, by 1960, Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's concessionary "Wind of Change" speech in Cape Town stood in stark contrast to the ostentations of Cecil Rhodes' "Cape to Cairo" goal from a generation before. The British Empire's topographical fetishism, proudly inculcated in the English youth upon entering grammar school, and infamously portrayed in the sketch of Rhodes, seen straddling the African continent, had unceremoniously collapsed into sheer bourgeois nostalgia in less than twenty post-war-years. This was only one side of the coin, however, in respect to Britain's incapacity to maintain its territorial holdings. The other side was the post-war ascendancy of the US, which despite sharing the ideological spoils of war with its ally, fortuitously failed to share Britain's dire need for fiscal prophylactics and post-war damage control, especially following Japan's insertion into the "Impregnable Fortress" in the British stronghold of Singapore in 1942 (Churchill christened the fall of Singapore as the "largest capitulation" in British history). Winston Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, vol. 4 (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1950), 81. Henceforth, Britain found itself

obliged to accept. In the aftermath of the war, Thatcher's approval ratings sharply climbed to forty-four percent which, given her basement-dwelling approval ratings from the previous year, nearly suggested *revolution*.²⁶

For many, however, there was a darker side to the legacy of the Falklands spirit. For the naysayers, Thatcher's triumphant adventurism on the high seas had more to do with sheer serendipity than sound leadership. Curiously, the Madame Prime Minister's luck appeared to be transatlantic.²⁷ At home, she had reached the top of the greasy pole, as Benjamin Disraeli called the game of politics, by running against an inept Labour Party, in 1979, which was spoken for by the political leper, Michael Foot. While abroad, her coterie of opponents appeared to have curiously fallen from the same sick tree. This unified front of futility allowed Thatcher to seamlessly transfer her Downing Street manners and political temperament into the War Cabinet with relative ease. Giving traction to this back-story was the revelation, that on multiple occasions, Argentinian shells fortuitously failed to detonate after penetrating British steel on the stormy South Seas.²⁸ Considering its lauded maritime bullishness and the flow of US-supplied Sidewinder missiles and logistical support, Britain's routing of the junta's Armada was not as inspiring as it was once thought to be.

Almost everything the government attempted was in some way interconnected with the Falklands factor. For Thatcher, who had already been given the sobriquet *The Iron Lady* by a Moscow propagandist no less, the Falklands triumph legitimized her military prowess, emboldened her electorate base, and perhaps, most significantly, reaffirmed her conviction to remake the domestic scene. Yet, not all shared the post-war afterglow. If Thatcher's thick-skinned indifference and notorious harshness toward her cabinet members was barely tolerable before Argentina's surrender during her first term, then what was one to expect from her second term? Even after her death, Thatcher's fidelity to the spirit of the Falklands remains a point of variance among dyed-in-the-wool Thatcherites, jilted-maudlin Labourites, and fellow-travelers. Following her death, Gary Younge, writing in *The Nation*, scolded Thatcher for the "petty nationalism" that was on display during the

parrying "client state" accusations, as post-war reshuffling now compelled London to consult Washington prior to acting on the global stage. For a further treatment of post-war Britain's imperial demise, see Guy Arnold, *Britain since 1945: Choice, Conflict and Change* (London: Blandford, 1989), 41-49.

²⁶ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 280.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 279-280.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Falklands War.²⁹ Further tarnishing her reputation was the surfacing of details regarding the authorized sinking of the *Belgrano* (in which 368 sailors drowned) while it was outside of the Exclusion Zone near the Falklands. Later, at Chequers, while entertaining a prominent group of artists, including Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Thatcher, while surveying the furniture, proudly noted the corner chair in which she had sat when she elected to scuttle the *Belgrano*.³⁰ Her triumphal bearing is noticeably missing in *The Downing Street Years*, in which she describes the *Belgrano* sailing on the edge of the Exclusion Zone while the ship's "poor state of battle readiness greatly increased the casualties."³¹ She goes on to blame the *Belgrano*'s escorts for failing to rescue the drowning seamen. No longer writing from the "*Belgrano* chair," the once warrior-queen had seemingly become a queen apologist. The same spear that was used to claim her greatest victory had now splintered in her hand. The immediate effect that the Falklands had on Thatcher, however, was much less fragmented.

In the aftermath of victory, the prime minister gloried in her newfound Churchillian radiance. The nation, it seemed, had been reborn. Whatever doubt remained in Thatcher's mind regarding the rectitude of her intentions, either foreign or domestic, and her ability to superintend those aims, was soon to join the *Belgrano*. Meanwhile, after the eleven-week campaign had ended, and Thatcher returned to more civil matters, she appeared unable to temper the tenacity that she had enthusiastically displayed within the War Cabinet. The transition was unsettling. After the hated governing junta had capitulated, Thatcher's gunboat diplomacy turned its bowsprit north, navigated away from the South Atlantic, and sailed straight up the Thames. Torpedoing the hull of an Argentinian cruiser required a particular type of mettle, alleviating public squalor in Bristol and Manchester another. Or did it?

The Falklands Reconsidered

Once the Parliamentary backslapping abated and the singing of "Rule Britannia" had been drowned-out by economic woes, questions began to surface regarding the Falklands' pre-history and Thatcher's retaking of the islands. The questions and details surrounding the decision to sink the *Belgrano*, curiously became murkier as the fog of war lifted. Predictably, the prime minister was not about to open the door to such solicitations. It may have begun to drizzle, but Thatcher was not quite done parading.

²⁹ Gary Younge, "How Did Thatcher Do It?" *The Nation*, April 29, 2013, accessed June 8, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/article/173732/how-did-margaret-thatcher-do-it>.

³⁰ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 277.

³¹ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 215.

Nonetheless, thunderclouds were appearing. Once it surfaced that the *Belgrano* had been sailing away from the Falklands and not toward the islands, as the British people had been mistakenly led to believe, the pretext for sinking the moribund vessel came into question. When pressed regarding the discrepancy during a BBC Television interview, a visibly annoyed Thatcher nearly sparked a political grease fire when she protested that the ship “was not sailing away from the Falklands.”³² Apparently, her compass needed recalibrating. When it was later revealed that a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Defense, Clive Ponting, had secretly leaked incriminating details of what had actually happened to the vessel in the cold waters of the South Atlantic, he was swiftly prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act of 1911.³³ Although Ponting was later acquitted, the Iron Lady emerged from her televised fit of vapors having lost some of her luster. For many, Ponting’s indictment and trial evidenced another attempt by Mrs. Thatcher to ghostwrite her post-Falklands hagiography, a narrative, which largely due to a yeoman’s work of editing, would read well during her re-election in 1983.

For Thatcher’s supporters, the Argentinian campaign reflected her ability to make top-level decisions, take risks, and confront tremendous obstacles. During the crisis, she noticeably eschewed her own diplomats for the company of admirals and generals. Having been the only female member of the Carlton Club since 1975, she was well versed in the posing and overcompensation typically characteristic at all-male gatherings. Thatcher was as comfortable on the shop floor as she was with shoptalk. Parliament soon discovered, to the dismay of many, that she was better suited for administering the gladiatorial thumbs-down to the beleaguered *Belgrano* than negotiating with trade unions. These traits served her well during wartime, as certain occasions require specific skill sets. According to Anthony King, could anyone other than de Gaulle have pulled France’s chestnuts out of the fire in Algeria? Would either Heath or Callaghan have engaged in a fight with the Galtieri junta?³⁴

On the other hand, much of this triumphalism was a mere papering-over of the cracks in the edifice. Amidst accusations of having mismanaged the war and misleading the public, victory nevertheless convinced Thatcher of her own righteousness. “The Old Testament prophets did not say, ‘Brothers, I want a consensus,’” she once remarked. “They said, ‘This is my faith. This is what I passionately believe. If you

³² “Margaret Thatcher on *Nationwide* Questioned over the *Belgrano*,” 5:49, from a televised interview for “*Nationwide*” on BBC Television May 24, 1983, posted by “harmlessdrudge1986,” May 5, 2013, accessed June 8, 2013, YouTube video, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JZlP5qQVtE>.

³³ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 287.

³⁴ Anthony King, “The Outsider as Political Leader: The Case of Margaret Thatcher,” *British Journal of Political Science* 32, no. 3 (2002): 453.

believe it, too, then come with me;" coincidentally, not long after His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, would pay her a visit in London.³⁵ At the height of her post-Falklands acme, Thatcher's outsider-rebel status was smelted and fashioned into a formidable weapon, wielded at friend and foe alike. When it came to describing the relationship with her European ministerial colleagues, *swimmingly* would not have been the operative term. Political fratricide was never beneath her. She held an acute disdain for Conservative "wets" who, as W.H. Auden said of poets, make "nothing happen."³⁶ Anthony King reminds us "Thatcher became the first prime minister in British history to sack cabinet ministers on a large scale, not because they were incompetent, but because they disagreed with her."³⁷ The lady, who was famously "not for turning," was also not for moderating, placating, or conceding. Either no one told her that the lion's share of Old Testament prophets were killed by their own people, or she simply did not care. "But what Thatcherism stood for more than anything else was the 'smack of firm government.'"³⁸

Thatcher and the UK Miners' Strike of 1984–85

If West Africa was known as the "white man's graveyard" during the late nineteenth century, then the coal union's bargaining table was the Conservative man's graveyard in the late twentieth century. As Thatcher dispensed the quinine and readied her cabinet in the spring of 1984, there were plenty of political scars still visible from the 1973–74 miners' strike that had coughed up Conservative Prime Minister, Ted Heath. Despite Thatcher's prophylactics, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and its Marxist president, Arthur Scargill, held an almost Cromwellian power to make or break British governments, or at the very least, browbeat and threaten policymakers with their collection of Conservative pelts. Coal production had been in decline since the First World War, and by the time the post-war Labour Government, under Clement Attlee, had carried out their commitment for nationalization in 1947, production had decreased from 292 million tons to 187 million tons.³⁹ "By the 1970s the coal mining industry had come to symbolize everything that was wrong with Britain," grizzled Thatcher.⁴⁰ Having had her moral clarity recently

³⁵ Margaret Thatcher, "Speech to Conservative Rally in Cardiff," Margaret Thatcher Foundation, accessed June 8, 2013. <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/104011>.

³⁶ W.H. Auden, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in *Collected Shorter Poems 1927-1957* (New York: Random House, 1966), 142.

³⁷ King, 447.

³⁸ Judt, 540.

³⁹ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 340.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

honed in the Falklands, Thatcher looked at the NUM with the eyes of a hunter who had already tasted blood. The NUM was uncompetitive, inefficient, overstaffed, and domineering. Not only had they parasitized the post-war Keynesian welfare state, but as representatives of the British working class, they wielded powerful political cudgels as well. Thatcher, with the zealotry of an Old Testament prophet, wasted little time in conspiring to cut down the NUM. A blueprint for dealing a fatal blow to the unions had been floating about since the mid-1970s. The so-called Ridley Plan, named after Nicholas Ridley, a fellow Conservative who had held hands with Heath while heading toward electoral disaster in 1973–74, called for a cold-blooded battle of attrition. Ridley's script, no less, was a splendid slice of Machiavellian statecraft. The arrangement called for economic siege warfare combined with a well-trained, mobile police force, available to maintain order once desperate workers began to cross picket lines. To be sure, the plan was radical, perhaps too radical for Thatcher, at least during her first term.

To no one's surprise, and everyone's anticipation, Scargill, short on stature and memory, described Thatcher's re-election as "the worst national disaster for a hundred years."⁴¹ Thatcher braced for a political duel. By autumn, both camps began to size up one another. Ian MacGregor, the man who had recently put British steel back in the black, was tapped by Thatcher to chair the National Coal Board (NCB) and participate in the difficult task of negotiating with the NUM. Thatcher and MacGregor's prescription for the coal industry included cutting the workforce by sixty-four thousand over three years, decreasing coal output by twenty-five million tons, and closing a number of uneconomic pits on a pit-by-pit basis (i.e., by 1983, roughly seventy-five percent of coal pits were losing money).⁴² The prospect of closing uneconomic pits was anathema to Scargill, and any attempt by the union to doff its hat to conciliation was akin to mining a bad tooth.

Meanwhile, as the standoff began to play out on the evening news, the NUM circulated the story that Thatcher had a secret hit list of pits due for closure--an accusation that Thatcher denies in *The Downing Street Years*.⁴³ Forgoing the requisite national ballot, which required a fifty-five percent majority vote, Scargill instead called for a strike in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire in March of 1984. By mid-year it was clear that MacGregor, then aged seventy, was beginning to tire. The man who Thatcher once described as her only equal had proven the prime minister's excessive praise to be just that.⁴⁴ The use of the Ridley Plan, however, now allowed Thatcher and the NCB to escape disaster and

⁴¹ Ibid., 367.

⁴² Ibid., 343.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 365.

redouble their efforts. The plan—akin to moves in a game of chess—called for: storing coal at the power stations and not the pit heads, check; for setting aside the funds necessary to maximize oil-fired power stations in order to offset diminishing coal output, check; for importing alternative power from France and Scotland, check; for cutting-off financial support to mining families, forcing the union to provide for them, check; and, finally, for deploying a substantial number of well-trained riot police, checkmate.

The Strike Ends

In September, the government's negotiations were interrupted when Patrick Magee, a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), detonated a long-delay time bomb next to Thatcher's suite at the Grand Hotel in Brighton as she prepared to deliver a speech at a Conservative Party conference. The explosion waylaid the Conservative leadership, killing five and wounding thirty-one. Thatcher, who was working on her speech, at 2:54 a.m., barely skirted the blast as it buckled the second floor of the Grand Hotel and rearranged the prime minister's lavatory.⁴⁵ England was appalled; not since the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 had conspirators so brazenly attempted to assassinate a British head of state. Thatcher emerged unscathed, undaunted, and unyielding as she redoubled her convictions the following morning and delivered her speech as scheduled. In retrospect, her survival had less to do with the rectitude of her Victorian morals and more with the resilience of Victorian architecture. The IRA's handiwork might have left a heavy footprint on the Grand Hotel, but the old façade's structural integrity proved salvific for the Iron Lady. The entire sordid affair was disastrous for Scargill and the NUM. Smelling blood, Thatcher wasted no time. "These are the very dangers which we face in Britain today. At one end of the spectrum are the terrorist gangs within our borders, and the terrorist states, which finance and arm them. At the other are the hard left operating inside our system, conspiring to use union power and the apparatus of local government to break, defy and subvert the laws," remarked Thatcher to the Carlton Club following the bombing.⁴⁶ Emboldened by her own brush with death, and aware of the window of public sympathy that she had been afforded since the attempt on her life, Thatcher out-flanked the opposition. During speeches and interviews, she began to preach that the far left was soft terrorism. As an avowed Marxist, Scargill was indubitably reproached as a public menace and security threat. The game was up for the NUM. While Britain was still reeling from the Brighton

⁴⁵ Young, *The Iron Lady*, 372.

⁴⁶ Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*, 371.

Hotel bombing, Thatcher had snatched the lifejacket from a drowning Scargill. The Ridley Plan, which had been sewn in the defeat of the 1974 coal strike, was now being reaped in the victory of the 1984 strike. Scargill's final pleas amounted to no more than a deathbed confession, as coal miners across the country laced up their steel-toe boots and returned to the pits. After more than a year, the strike ended unceremoniously.

The strike, however, was never solely about union rights. For Thatcher, the moralist, pitched battles were always distilled down to a conflict between good and evil, and she, more than anyone else, knew which side she represented. Yet, much of Britain did not share her appetite for spiritual warfare. There was no self-congratulatory posturing or memorializing once the strike ended, and miners returned to work. Unlike during the Argentinian conflict, for most British people, there was no *other* during the standoff. Besides, the "real reason the miners' strike failed was simple: At the 1983 election, only two out of five union members had voted Labour."⁴⁷ Having played the role of engaged bystander during the mass picketing, the British people were given a domestic encore to Thatcher's critically acclaimed performance in the Falklands two years prior. Yet, the bullying and browbeating of one's own countrymen is a far different matter. As much as Thatcher's reading list included Friedrich von Hayek and Winston Churchill, it was her copy of Machiavelli's *The Prince* that emerged from the yearlong strike dog-eared and well-exercised. As Judt said, "The British were once again being ruled."⁴⁸

Notwithstanding the union's overtures to the working man, once the strike had been terminated, the public's affection for Scargill was

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "The Importance of Being Prickly: How Margaret Thatcher Ruled," *The New Republic*, April 13, 2013, accessed June 5, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/112888/margaret-thatcher-and-importance-being-prickly#>.

⁴⁸ Judt, 541. Although Thatcher's wardrobe preference typically leaned toward Aquascutum, and her handbag likings Launer, her economic tastes were firmly Austrian. On one occasion, during a Conservative Party gathering, chafed by the circuitous oratory of a fellow confrère, Thatcher commandeered from her briefcase a copy of Austrian economist, Friedrich von Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*. Holding the book up high for all to see, she said, "This is what we believe," and "banged Hayek down on the table." John Ranelagh, *Thatcher's People: An Insider's Account of the Politics, the Power, and the Personalities* (London: Harper Collins, 1991), ix. Indeed, her policies proved to be one generous helping after another from Hayek's neoliberal smorgasbord. In some cases through book, chapter, and verse. To understand Thatcher's loathing of the welfare state, see chapter 17 of *The Constitution of Liberty*. For her views on subsidized housing, see chapter 22. For her views on labor unions, read chapter 18. To understand her position on private property, see page 207. See F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, trans. and ed. Ronald Hamowy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

virtually nonexistent. However, neither was Downing Street bereft of blemish. Thatcher's anti-trades union odyssey had whittled away the industrial and manufacturing sectors in the North, leaving three million British jobless by 1985. Judt surmised "by disdain and dismantling all collectively-held resources, by vociferously insisting upon an individualist ethic that discounted any unquantifiable assets, Margaret Thatcher did serious harm to the fabric of British public life."⁴⁹

Thatcherism: Alive and Well?

Indeed, if the bureaucratic miasma and "stagflation" of the 1970s vindicated Hayek's economic forecast, then Thatcher's declawing of the militant labor unions (i.e., the Trades Union Congress lost seventeen percent of its membership within five years) legitimized her own prognostications. Under Thatcher, the Conservative Party had corralled inflation, humbled the labor force, curbed union power, and emboldened her middle-class constituency. Perhaps most telling is that the key tenets of Thatcherism are alive and well to this day. They debut each week during Questions to the Prime Minister. After Callaghan and Thatcher took consecutive turns at the wheel, veering first to the left, then to the far right, the keys were passed to Tony Blair who tried to stay between the lines. Even then, the ship of state still tacked to the right. When Thatcher was asked to name her greatest achievement, she gave the nod to Tony Blair, the practicing "Third Way" Labourite. Following her death in April, the Millennials who participated in the anti-Thatcher campaign on YouTube were no doubt responding to their parents and grandparents carping of how Thatcher had forced them to give away the family silver.

The Benefit of "Luck"

In both life and death, Thatcher's achievements were routinely dismissed as merely owing to luck (if one believes in such a thing) or favorable circumstances. "How Did Margaret Thatcher Do It?" rang the title of Gary Younge's scabrous review in *The Nation*, following the announcement of her death in April.⁵⁰ "She was lucky in her enemies," decried Geoffrey Wheatcroft in the *New Republic*.⁵¹ There is something to be said for the shortcomings of Gorbachev and Galtieri, and the indolence within the Labour Party (nor did Scargill's collectivist

⁴⁹ Judt, 543.

⁵⁰ Younge, 10.

⁵¹ Wheatcroft, 7.

imaginings cause anyone to forget Trotsky). This hand is often played, however. Even posthumously, Thatcher is able to elude these darts which are pulled from the pocket of the crowd who has grown accustomed to twenty years of mealy-mouthed politicians on both sides of the pond. Besides, the “lucky” charge could be ascribed to any leader. Churchill was lucky not to catch a Pashtun bullet in the frontier region of British India. After writing over eight hundred pages in *Postwar*, many of which are dedicated to revolutions, Judt judiciously remarked that “Thatcher, like all the best revolutionaries, was fortunate in her enemies.”⁵² Successful revolutions are the handmaidens of good fortune.

Domestic Destruction

For those not swayed by the whims of fortune and chance, there remain plenty of valid criticisms to direct at Thatcher. Most of her economic victories, despite their efficiency, were pyrrhic. Under the Iron Lady, unemployment skyrocketed and the majority of the populace, especially the working-class, suffered mightily.⁵³ The neoliberal gauntlet of privatization and deregulation were ubiquitous during her three electoral victories. Her attempts to dismantle the welfare state were radical. The mass auctioning-off of public housing to tenants opened the housing market to speculation and saddled the middle-classes with a culture of debt, which they would pay for in spades during the property crash of the early 1990s. As a society, the British people suffocated under Thatcher.⁵⁴

Conclusion

When cataloguing the entire Argentine engagement, there is an inescapable Manichaeian proclivity to distil and divide Thatcher’s handling of the affair into terms of good or evil, saint or sinner. Despite holding onto this unrequited hope for clarity, however, rarely does life’s tree yield us such low hanging fruit. Inevitably, history will veil the facts, leaving us to run toward the warm embrace of simple speculation. Surely, however, life’s mosaic provides a more byzantine reading; at least it has in the case of Margaret Thatcher.

Inasmuch as some authors, such as Martin Holmes, argue that Britain’s economy operated at a practiced cadence under Thatcher, others, such as Tony Judt, recall how British society foundered under her

⁵² Judt, 542.

⁵³ David Harvey, “Neo-liberalism as Creative Destruction,” *Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography* 88, no. 2 (2006): 155.

⁵⁴ Judt, 543.

tutelage. Following her death, two lines began to form behind these markers and spar over her legacy. Yet, these debates, while important, are limited in their explanatory scope. Like many discussions regarding an individual's legacy, the long-term consequences and continuing effects often become the starting point from which people argue backward. While such a course may brush-in the background of the portrait, it often fails to paint the subject.

In sketching Thatcher's tactics during the Falklands War and the UK miners' strike, one characteristic emerges alongside her legacy: that of an outsider-leader. Indeed, and for all of her peddling of free market liberalism and *nouveau riche* appeal, Thatcher was a provincial, born in bucolic Grantham, a grocer's daughter. Within British Conservatism, she was an outsider who abjured consensus, reveled in Parliamentary brinkmanship, and shunned the conventional and despised Tory grandees. Depending on the company, she was always careful to either play up or play down her rearing as a *petite bourgeoisie*. Thatcher was fiercely independent, deeply suspicious, and rather adept at accumulating enemies. Self-identifying as an outsider characterized much of her legacy. Convinced of the soundness of her opinions and hemmed in by a coterie of ideological sycophants, Thatcher drew a non-negotiable ethical line in the sand. Those who chose to differ with her were considered turncoats. It was not the harmony of the Sermon on the Mount that stirred her, but the desert morality and righteous indignation of the sages in the Old Testament. It was from this moral fount that she drank heavily. Opposing governments, Marxist labor unions, welfare state apologists, and, as reported on occasion, visiting editors and mulish diplomats alike were conflated into a single roguish syndicate. Argentina's Galtieri and the NUM's Scargill were merely two heads of the same serpent-like Hydra. She dealt lead to the former and a lethal dose of Conservative retribution to the latter. Although the ethic of her legacy will continue to be disputed, her impact on British politics will not. "To anyone who had fallen asleep in England in 1978 and awoken twenty years later, their country would have seemed unfamiliar indeed: quite unlike its old self—and markedly different from the rest of Europe."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Judt, 547.

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